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**Author:** Józef Budniak

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JÓZEF BUDNIAK

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

## Religious Education of Children in Families of Different Confessions

**Keywords:** Roman Catholic and Evangelical Church, religious education, children, inter-religious marriages.

Cieszyn Silesia region is proud of its idiosyncratic history since the 16th century. It is a region where two confessions — Roman Catholic and Evangelical-Augsburg — live peacefully together. The number of Protestants living here amounts to 50,000 nowadays (it is a region of Poland with the biggest number of Protestant inhabitants). Due to this fact, there are more and more inter-religious families in the area.

The unquestionable fact is that the family is the first and the most important educational environment for a child. It also includes religious education. Parents are the first teachers of faith and it is them who are responsible for their children religious education. In inter-religious families the task is even more difficult as the child is brought up at the meeting of two religions which differ from each other. Moreover, it is the family that introduces the child into the Church community. There, they are taught their first prayers, start their first religious discussions, read the Holy Scripture and — last but not least — a positive attitude to the Lord is developed in the child.

Religious education “is a conscious social activity based on an educational relationship between the pupil and the teacher whose aim is to evoke in the pupil deliberate identity changes. The changes include cognitive-instrumental structures connected with understanding the reality and interaction skills which help to influence it, as well as emotional and motivating structures, which means shaping the man’s attitude

towards the world and people, their beliefs and behaviour, the hierarchy of values and sense of life.”<sup>1</sup> However, religious education is a system based on the fact that “the educational activity is subordinated to the foundations of a religion; in Poland it is the Roman Catholic religion, which the majority of the society identifies with. Religious education is rich in traditions: in the old days in Poland, it used to be the dominant part of education but gradually, as there were more and more attempts to separate the Church from the State, it has become one of the elements of school education. After World War II, there was a progressive separation between the Church and the State; in 1990, the Polish government decided to reintroduce religious education in state schools.”<sup>2</sup> Religious education concerns the growth of new life united with God which means that the process of learning certain achievements related to the love for God is set in motion. It takes place in the family, in the Church, in the social milieu and at school, and its main aims are to teach the love for God, to bring up to a life in faith and prayer, to participate in the holy mass, to understand the Eucharist and to shape the conscience.<sup>3</sup> Religious education is understood as handing down the faith and as a school of faith, as an integral part of holistic education, which for a Roman Catholic should be its vital part.<sup>4</sup>

An important part in the educational process is “the originating from anthropology adequate consciousness of the ideal, the attitude to the truth and personal responsibility of both the teachers and pupils. [...] the vital aspect is the character of the teacher. Their pedagogical gift, good interpersonal skills, competence, responsibility for themselves and other people, kindness coming from love are all the features which have an essential influence on the pupil.”<sup>5</sup>

Religious training is “a process of inner, autonomic, reflexive existential change of an individual and the activities supporting this process which are performed in the normative horizon of values, sense, meanings and events connected with tradition and contemporary practices of a given religion.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. OKOŃ: *Nowy Słownik Pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 2004, pp. 462—463.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 466

<sup>3</sup> G. HANSEMAN: *Wychowanie religijne*. Warszawa 1988, pp. 83—88.

<sup>4</sup> K. JEŻYŃA, T. ZADYKOWICZ: *Wychowanie w rodzinie chrześcijańskiej. Przesłanie moralne Kościoła*. Lublin 2008, pp. 53—54.

<sup>5</sup> A. RYNIO: “‘Wczoraj’ i ‘Dziś’ katolickiej myśli pedagogicznej w kontekście współczesnych wyzwań wychowawczych.” In: *Pedagogika chrześcijańska. Tradycja. Współczesność. Nowe wyzwania*. Eds. J. MICHAŁSKI, A. ZAKRZEWSKA. Toruń 2010, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> B. MILERSKI: *Hermeneutyka pedagogiczna. Perspektywy pedagogiki religii*. Warszawa 2011, p. 230.

Religious education plays an important role in the life of every Christian. The attitude of parents, religion teachers and priests has an indispensable significance in shaping the religious thinking of a child. The biggest responsibility for the religiousness, morality and hierarchy of values rests with the family. However, the ideal of Christian education is to follow our Lord, to hand down the truth and to lavish big, absolute and inevitable love on everyone.

## The role of the family in the process of Christian education

At home “the child gets their first religious experiences. The relationship with mother or both parents creates favourable conditions to teach the child religious practices, like participating in services, prayers, charity. Entering the religious community is another experience. That is why the Roman Catholic Church and other Churches care so much about the religious education in families. [...] Parents — mother and father, teachers and priests are the important role models in religious education, not to mention the religious climate of home, school and contacts with other members of a given religion.”<sup>7</sup> But the unquestionable fact is that the family must have considerable standing.

When John Paul II talks about the parents’ standing, he tries not to use the word “authority” because in his opinion parents just participate in the upbringing process, they are not the authority. The parents’ role is kind of a “service” subordinated to the benefits of the child and its aim is to enable them to gain a responsible freedom. The child must be helped in making the right choice between the good and the evil. What these extremes mean, the child learns in the process of education. That is why, the parents must have their standing, their personalities must be full of values which they want to hand down to their children. Parents should show their children to what depths the faith and Jesus Christ’s love lead. However, it is not enough only to talk about it but there must be examples which the children could follow. Parents must not only talk about love, but they must create a home full of love to make the process of education effective.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> W. OKOŃ: *Nowy Słownik Pedagogiczny...*, p. 466.

<sup>8</sup> T. ZADYKOWICZ: “Autorytet w wychowaniu.” In: *Wychowanie w rodzinie chrześcijańskiej. Przestanie moralne Kościoła*. Eds. K. JEŻYNA, T. ZADYKOWICZ. Lublin 2008, pp. 47—51.

According to the authors in some Evangelical publications, an important influence on the child's demeanour and behaviour comes from the parents and the household: "[...] if the atmosphere is full of love, warmth and care in the Christian home, then the young are in good mood, too. If parents say the prayers together with the child, the kid gets a good example and learns to pray from the earliest age and this evokes in the child the need for religious life — participation in the life of the Church and in services.<sup>9</sup> The task of the adult is to support the child; to support them when they face problems and gather new experiences. The child must know that the parents are interested in them and are fond of them.<sup>10</sup>

## Marriage from the Roman Catholic point of view

Parents constitute a couple which is the basic institution in all nations and religions, it is the smallest unit of human community. The most important here is the love between the wife and the husband, the love which God bestows upon the man. The Roman Catholic Church regards marriage as one of the sacraments, it is the picture of God's covenant with his people. In the wedding the bride and the groom promise each other love, faithfulness, honesty and indissolubility of their marriage. The Roman Catholic Church does not recognize divorces and it is impossible to be wed twice in the church.<sup>11</sup>

As far as inter-religious marriages are concerned, the Roman Catholic Church is of the opinion that a marriage of members of different religions may cause arguments and problems, and in consequence the couple may drift apart. What is more, the Church claims that the biggest problems arise when it comes to bringing up children. This may result in withdrawing of both parties from the oath and then the offspring might be brought up in a non-religious way. A considerable difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church can be noticed in their understanding of marriage — for the Catholics it is a sacrament, for the Protestants it is not. Therefore, when the Catholic side wants to marry

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<sup>9</sup> J. BADURA: "Jezus wychowuje przykładem." *Zwiastun Ewangelicki* 2008, no. 3, pp. 6—7.

<sup>10</sup> A. MIKLER-CHWASTEK: "Czy Jezus wielkim pedagogiem był? — wspieramy rozwój zgodnie z przykazaniem miłości." *Zwiastun Ewangelicki* 2008, no. 20, pp. 6—8.

<sup>11</sup> P. JASKÓŁA: *Problem małżeństwa w relacjach ewangelicko-rzymskokatolickich. Historia i perspektywy nowych rozwiązań*. Opole 2013, pp. 141—146.

to a member of the Protestant Church, they need a bishop dispensation. In addition, the Protestant side is obliged to sign a declaration which says that the child will be brought up in the Catholic faith.<sup>12</sup>

The Roman Catholic priests also see the difficulties in the relations between spouses in inter-religious marriages. They say that: "life in these families is really difficult, and problems appear continually. The young people's only motivation to enter into marriage is their love. In some cases, it is enough — in cases where there is a cooperation with Love, which means the Lord." *Cautele* (a declaration and vow which is signed by the bride and groom of different religions) are not always respected. "Sometimes it is a problem to decide in which Church the child should be baptized or which religion lessons they should attend. For those people it is often a tragedy when they leave the house together on a Sunday morning and then they go in different directions."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Roman Catholic priests think that if somebody takes the decision to get married to a member of a different religion, it is a well-thought-out decision and the idea of ecumenism which is included in this form of marriage is to keep to one's religion and not to convert to the other.

## Marriage from the Evangelical-Augsburg point of view

In the Evangelical Church marriage is perceived in a different way than in the Roman Catholic Church. For Protestants, it is not a sacrament. Even if people enter into marriage at a registry office, it is recognized as valid in the Evangelical Church. The Evangelical-Augsburg marriage is a synonym of Christ's love for the Church. It makes the newly-weds unite with the Christian community and it does not mean that the woman is subjected to the man but they are both in a state of utter subjection to the Lord. The Evangelical catechism for adults says that marriage is an institution, an alliance and partnership. Love, sexuality, a desire for offspring, faithfulness, common tasks, relations with other people and the attitude towards the Church are behind it. In the opinion of the members of the Evangelical Church, marriage at its core is indissoluble, but there are cases of divorces, too. If the relationship between the woman and the man is ill, it is better for them to divorce. The Lutheran faith allows its follow-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, pp. 147—148.

<sup>13</sup> J. BUDNIAK: *Ekumenizm jutra na przykładzie Śląska Cieszyńskiego*. Katowice 2002, pp. 220—221.

ers to enter into marriage for the second time because it adopts a view that our Lord is merciful and forgiving and gives the chance for a new start.<sup>14</sup>

Let us concentrate now on young people belonging to different confessions and present their point of view. Nowadays young people who want to marry each other are not influenced by religious differences and they often tend to avoid a church wedding as it causes too many problems. The Protestants think that different religions of the bride and groom can be an obstacle for the harmony in marriage, but the other opinion is that the religious difference may in a sense enrich the couple. Children brought up in such families can get to know the spiritual value of both Churches; unfortunately they cannot belong to both Churches as their world needs to be clear and united. For the Lutherans, the future lies in the ecumenical services which will let them educate their children in the spirit of ecumenism and understanding. This Church does not put pressure on its members and allows them to celebrate marriage ceremony in the Catholic Church. It is also aware of the necessity of pastoral support and help which the young people might need. However, the activities are not meant to keep those people in the Protestant Church but their aim is to pay attention to the problems connected with their different religions.<sup>15</sup>

Lutheran pastors think that “inter-religious couples should decide on the roles between them and the children before they get married. The decision about the inter-religious wedding belongs to the engaged couple and only they decide how they will solve the question of bringing up the children. It also depends on how strong their faith is and how much God’s love is in them. Moreover, young people should be free to make the decision on their own and nobody must put pressure on them as to how their future life should look like. These couples that stick firmly to their beliefs are creative, active and they function well. But the Lutheran pastors emphasize the stiff rules of the Roman Catholic Church about inter-religious marriages — the must of a Roman Catholic to get the bishop dispensary to marry in the Lutheran Church, the primacy of the Roman Catholic priest in case of an ecumenical wedding. According to the faithful, the Churches should not put any pressure on the couples living in such marriages — which Church to attend, how to bring up the children, where to baptize them. The couples-to-be often face a difficult choice and the new family will have to cope with the problem, especially in the issue of bringing up the children. There comes the task of priests and pastors

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. P. JASKÓŁA: *Problem małżeństwa w relacjach...*, pp. 129–138.

<sup>15</sup> Cf.: *Ibidem*, pp. 139, 140, 169.



who should respect the choices and help the spouses to live on and solve the difficult questions.<sup>16</sup>

## Stages of religious education of a child

The religious education is aimed at “a permanent union of the child with the Lord, namely to a life in grace through a better meeting Him and giving a testimony about Him. The point is that in the child’s mind the picture of the loving God is shaped — the God giving you the feeling of safety.”<sup>17</sup>

The children understand the signs of the religious life taking place around them before they start to speak. At first it is just intuition but later the understanding is similar to the understanding of the adults. That is why religious education should start at the very early age. In the process of the child’s development, they begin to talk about the Lord with the parents, they start saying their prayers. The process is intensified when the child starts to ask the first questions: some of them concern religion. Parents must answer the questions thoroughly, which means they need to have a proper knowledge on this subject. Another stage in the child’s development is discovering God through discovering their own “I” and their own will. The child understands that God is like the father in the family who knows and sees everything, so the child starts to pray with a greater engagement. At this stage the child creates in their mind the picture of God by following the example of parents, especially the father. Therefore, the proper attitude of parents is so important because if the picture of father and God is at least once misrepresented, it is very difficult to change it.<sup>18</sup>

The stages of religious education of a little child clearly show how important the religious role of the parents is. Their attitude creates the picture of God which stays with the child for during their entire life. A bad example of the parents can result in resignation from religious life in their children’s adult life. The family home is the first and the most important school of religion and every parent must keep this in mind. Parents must cooperate in the process of education of their children — respect them

<sup>16</sup> J. BUDNIAK: *Ekumenizm jutra na przykładzie Śląska Cieszyńskiego...*, pp. 221—222.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P. PORĘBA: “Wychowanie religijne w rodzinie.” In: *Rodzina wspólnota miłości*. Ed. I. KRAINSKA-ROGAŁA. Kraków 1999, pp. 19—25.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 27, 28.



as human beings and treat them as a God's gift. They should show their obedience to God in order to pass this attitude to their children. Home is the place where virtues are formed; sacrifice, common sense and self-control are taught, and all this can bring the real freedom. Parents must not be afraid to admit error — everybody makes mistakes. When the child realizes the open attitude of the parents, they open themselves for the parents, too.

## Religious problems of inter-religious marriages

Sometimes inter-religious families can experience difficulties in fulfilling their religious role. Among the difficulties are:

- lack of responsibility of parents — parents often shift the responsibility for their child's religious education onto the Church, forgetting that they are the first religion teachers;
- lack of religious knowledge — parents are often not able to answer the child's questions concerning religion because their own knowledge is poor and they are reluctant in extending it;
- lack of educational skills — parents often lack the educational training; actually, love for the child is the base of everything, but sometimes it may have a destructive influence on religious education;
- lack of bonds with the parish;
- absence of parents from home;
- discord between educational institutions — often the Church and the State proclaim opposite outlook on life, in consequence the child is influenced by atheistic activities of schools and mass-media.<sup>19</sup>

In the past there was a rule among the inter-religious couples that the sons followed their father's religion and the daughters — their mother's. There is no need to say that it was an unwritten rule as — according to the directives of the Roman Catholic Church — all children born in an ecumenical family should be baptized in the Catholic Church. Nowadays, this rule seems to be forgotten and parents most often chose the same religion for their children, the Protestant one. Parents do not obey the document signed before their ecumenical wedding which distinctly shows that the attempts of pressure made by the Catholic Church failed and parents acted in accordance with their own beliefs.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf.: P. PORĘBA: "Wychowanie religijne w rodzinie...", pp. 37—42.

However, according to some research conducted in Cieszyn Silesia, inter-religious parents declare that they do not experience many problems in bringing up children. Traditionally, this is the mother's duty and she educates the children in her religion or in the religion which both parents accepted as theirs. Children accept the inter-religious marriage of their parents and parents would not mind if their children enter into marriage with someone of a different religion, too.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Spouses of inter-religious marriages face much more difficult task in bringing up their children than parents of the same religion. Therefore, their job is much more important because a child brought up in such family often does not understand all the different aspects of Evangelical-Augsburg and Roman Catholic confessions. The differences make the parents put much more effort in introducing the child into the religious life.

According to the research conducted in Cieszyn Silesia region concerning inter-religious families, it can be said that despite the document stipulating choosing the Catholic faith for their children, which the newly-weds sign before the wedding, they seldom act upon it. The conclusion is simple — the Roman Catholic Church, through its not very friendly attitude, discourages parents to educate their children in this religion.

Nevertheless, inter-religious couples live in the spirit of ecumenism, follow the Protestant and Catholic traditions in celebrating holidays, visit both churches and teach their children tolerance. Sometimes they meet with obstacles because of the differences in their religions, but generally they are the religious authority for their children and that means they fulfill their task properly. In the hierarchy of their values love occupies the highest place. Without doubt, there is also the belief in God, charity, kindness and honesty take significant positions. All the values which connect the Evangelical and the Catholic religions allow to form a good man and a good Christian because it counts most regardless of the religion they profess.

John Paul II, as the patron of the family, used to emphasise how important the role of the parents in children education is. The role of the inter-religious parents is even more important. The most vital purpose is

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<sup>20</sup> J. BUDNIAK: *Ekumenizm jutra...*, p. 223.

to live in concord with oneself and the other man. Therefore, ecumenical marriages — despite the fact that they are not religiously perfect — can become good parents and educate the child in the spirit of tolerance, respect, and in a world rich in traditions of both religions.

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## Religious Education of Children in Families of Different Confessions

### Summary

The family is the first and most important educational environment. It also concerns religious education. Parents are the first teachers of faith and they are responsible for their children's religious education. In inter-religious families the job is even harder as

the child is brought up at the meeting of two confessions which differ from each other. In such a family, the child is introduced into the Church community, taught the first prayer, starts the first conversations about religion, reads the Holy Scripture, and what is most important — he or she adopts a positive attitude to the faith in God.

Inter-religious families live in the spirit of ecumenism — they celebrate holidays in concord with Catholic and Lutheran traditions, attend both Churches, teach their children respect, love and tolerance for people of other religions. All these values help to educate the child to become a good man and a good Christian.

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## L'éducation religieuse des enfants dans une famille de différentes appartenances confessionnelles

### Résumé

La famille est le premier et le plus important milieu éducatif, et cela concerne aussi l'éducation religieuse. Les parents sont pour un enfant les premiers propagateurs de la foi et c'est sur eux que repose la responsabilité pour l'éducation religieuse de leurs enfants. Dans les familles de différentes appartenances confessionnelles, il est plus difficile de remplir ce rôle important puisque l'enfant est élevé dans un lieu de rencontre de deux confessions différentes. Dans une telle famille, l'enfant est introduit dans la communauté religieuse. Après qu'on lui a enseigné la première prière, il engage ses premières conversations sur les thèmes religieux, il lit la Sainte Écriture et, ce qui est le plus important, on fait naître en lui une attitude positive à l'égard de la foi en Dieu.

Les familles de différentes appartenances confessionnelles — en vivant dans l'esprit de l'œcuménisme — célèbrent les fêtes conformément à la tradition catholique et évangélique, elles fréquentent les deux églises, enseignent à leurs enfants le respect, l'amour et la tolérance envers les personnes de croyance différente. Ces valeurs permettent d'élever l'enfant de façon qu'il devienne un homme juste et un bon chrétien.

**Mots clés :** Église catholique et évangélique, éducation religieuse, enfants, familles de différente appartenance confessionnelle

JÓZEF BUDNIAK

## L'educazione religiosa dei bambini in una famiglia di diversa appartenenza religiosa

### Sommario

La famiglia è il primo e più importante ambiente educativo, cosa che riguarda anche l'educazione religiosa. I genitori sono per il bambino i primi divulgatori della fede e su di loro ricade la responsabilità dell'educazione religiosa dei figli. Nelle famiglie di diversa appartenenza religiosa l'adempimento di tale ruolo così importante è più difficile perché il bambino è educato al limite di due confessioni che sono diverse tra loro. In una

famiglia simile il bambino viene introdotto nella società ecclesiastica, gli viene insegnata la prima preghiera, intraprende le prime conversazioni su argomenti religiosi, legge le Sacre Scritture e, cosa più importante, nel bambino viene sviluppato il rapporto positivo con la fede in Dio. Le famiglie di diversa appartenenza religiosa — vivendo nello spirito dell'ecumenismo — celebrano le feste conformemente alla tradizione cattolica ed evangelica, frequentano entrambe le Chiese, insegnano ai bambini il rispetto, l'amore e la tolleranza per i credenti di altre confessioni. Tali valori permettono di educare il bambino per farlo diventare un buon uomo e cristiano.

**Parole chiave:** Chiesa cattolica ed evangelica, educazione religiosa, bambini, matrimoni di persone di diversa appartenenza religiosa.